



BY JACQUELINE FORSTER-ZIGERLI

Communist isolation, political unrest and economic crises have weighed heavily on the southern European republic of Albania for decades. But now the country is making up for lost time. With hard work, new ideas and entrepreneurial spirit, Albania's organic farming sector is catching up with western Europe.

Albania grasps organic opportunity

“Albania is like a beautiful, natural woman who has never worn a lot of make-up.” These are the words of Eduart Rumani, programme coordinator of the Swiss Cooperation Office in Albania. And, according to Rumani, this comparison holds true for Albania’s agricultural products: natural, fresh and wholesome. The southern European republic is showing signs of progress in agriculture, placing an emphasis on sustainability, innovative products and organics. The last ten years have witnessed the development of a significant organic supply, particularly of medicinal plants, olive oil, mushrooms and chestnuts. A project by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) on Sustainable Agricultural Support in Albania (SASA) has been the key driver of this development. With the help of the Swiss Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) and local partners it has been working since 2001 to establish the necessary structures for organic farming (see Box: “Sustainable Agriculture with Swiss and FiBL Assistance”).

Success with medicinal plants

On the outskirts of the capital city Tirana one can find the Xherdo Company’s large, modern building. It smells of essential oils. Xhevit Hysenaj welcomes us with freshly brewed sage tea. He used to work as an economist in a construction firm before founding the Xherdo company. The sight of a house packed with herbs in the north of Albania gave him the idea for his new business: producing organic extracts. Within a few years he has not only built up a new livelihood for himself and his family, but also for dozens of farming families in northern Albania and around 20 women from Tirana who work in his business.

So far Xhevit Hysenaj has concentrated fully on processing medicinal plants and blueberries for export. He supplies customers in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the USA; the export volume of his



precious and aromatic essences has risen in this time to ten tonnes per year. With help from the SASA project he was able to add a cool room to his premises, which is indispensable for the quality of the herbs and berries.

At this year’s BioFach in Nuremberg, Hysenaj is presenting his latest innovation: an organic shampoo that was developed and tested through the SASA project, with outstanding results. “This new shampoo is a real stroke of luck for us;” stresses Hysenaj, “it allows us to refine our liquid effluent and use it for this new purpose.” Everybody wins: the producer, the consumer and the environment!

Hot tip: olive oil with St. John’s Wort

Another new entrant to the medicinal plants business is Shpresa Shkalla. She owns a small olive-pressing business on the outskirts of Tirana. Her organic olive oil is sold in outlets including the Sheraton Hotel in Tirana and specialist Swiss retailers (such as Claro), and has won international prizes. All the more astonishing, given the seemingly overwhelming competition from Greece, Spain and Italy. But Shpresa Shkalla’s success lies in developing the new organic olive oil with a trace of St. John’s Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*). SASA supported the development of the new product, which not only provides an income to 40 farming families who cultivate and gather the valuable herb, but

is also giving consumers a natural remedy with which to fight off minor colds. The oil enjoys great popularity in Albania. Some of the direct beneficiaries of this are Ndriçim Duli, his father Muhamet and his uncle Ramazan. They live in the north of Albania, in the Shkodra region. “Two years ago we started to tend the 40-year-old olive trees again,” says Muhamet. “Before that we let the trees grow wild, harvested a few olives and pressed the oil with our feet. We needed the wood for fuel. But otherwise, we had little use for the olives.” After becoming linked with different actors within the SASA network, the Duli family decided to start maintaining the olive grove once more. One of the reasons was that they can supply the olives to Shpresa Shkalla’s press in Tirana and receive a good price. “I had no idea that there was market demand for olives and that the oil is so popular in Europe,” explains the son, Ndriçim Duli. “Now I’m very glad I had the courage to convert to the production of organic olives.” He took this step along with ten other neighbours, a group that will soon double in view of the rising sales of the sought-after oil.

Winter vegetables from the south

In the south of Albania the climate is predominantly mild. The soils are fertile and thanks to a good water supply, early vegetables can be reliably produced. Half of the country’s domestic vegetable production takes place in this region. In Mersin Lika’s warehouse there are stacks of sweet peppers, tomatoes, persimmons, cucumbers and yellow beans. These are destined for export to the neighbouring Balkan countries, Ukraine, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The business partner is the large Slovenian supermarket chain Mercator. Lika and Mercator started doing business together after they were introduced to each other by SASA. One hundred farming families have been able to secure their livelihoods on the strength of this cooperation.

Sustainable Agriculture Support in Albania

Sustainable Agricultural Support in Albania (SASA) was launched in 2001 by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC. Its aim was to maintain and improve livelihoods in the rural areas of Albania. Since 2006 SECO, the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs, has supported the work of SASA, not least in the establishment of marketing structures for the export of organic products. The Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) has been implementing the project for the past ten years. The project came to an end at the end of 2011, leaving around 200 organic farmers able to face the future with confidence. Thanks to

SASA they now also have their own organic organization, BioAdria. The project also founded an EU-accredited certification body, Albinspekt. And by virtue of all this work, organic agriculture has become a political priority in Albania with a dedicated law. "Albanian organic agriculture has huge potential," says Thomas Bernet, the project's coordinator from FiBL. "The geographical location, with pristine landscapes in the mountains and a Mediterranean climate on the coast ensure a great diversity of products." In addition Bernet sees a mood for change is beginning to grip the country. "The young generation of Albanians is ambitious, full of ideas and zest for action."

The SASA project also helped to set up seven sales outlets throughout the country. They include "Healthy Corners" in one of the largest supermarket chains and the Duty Free Shop at Tirana Airport, two restaurants which serve typical Albanian food, and a delivery truck that has been converted into a shop. These sales outlets all offer not only organic products but also another 60 or so high-quality products from Albania which bear the "Alpe Albania" and "Prodhime Jugu" labels of origin. Both labels are a further significant achievement of the SASA project.

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Organic agriculture has become a political priority in Albania

**Agriculture: the second most important sector**

The Republic of Albania is situated in south-eastern Europe on the western side of the Balkan Peninsula. The country is bordered by Kosovo to the north-east, Macedonia to the east and Greece to the south. With an area of around 28,800 square kilometres it is around two-thirds the size of Switzerland and has three million inhabitants. Albania is a traditional agricultural country. About a quarter of its total area is agriculturally usable and agriculture is the second most important sector of the Albanian economy, after the tertiary sector. Forty four per cent of the population work in agriculture, and over half of all Albanians live in rural regions, where agriculture is the main source of income. Farmers contribute 19 per cent to gross domestic product, yet receive only 0.5 per cent of the national budget. Productivity in the sector is persistently low. The main problems are a scarcity of investment capital, outdated production methods and a lack of access to markets. Nevertheless, organic agriculture offers great potential since it enables the country to make sustainable use of, and capitalize on, its rich biodiversity. ■

Watch the video on the SASA Project on YouTube -> SASA Albania
<http://www.youtube.com/user/FiBLFilm?feature=watch>